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SUBJECT: Comoros Reestablishes Links To Swahili Coast

11. (U) SUMMARY: After decades of instability and post-colonial focus on France, the Union of the Comoros is rediscovering historic links to the Swahili Coast of Africa. In partnership with Tanzania's Board of External Trade, the Comoran Chamber of Commerce will soon open an office in Dar es Salaam to improve and formalize trade ties. On a political level, President Sambi remains grateful for Tanzania's role in resolving the Anjouan crisis. END SUMMARY.

Common Arab-Swahili History  
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12. (U) Over centuries of modern history, Comoros' moderate Muslim culture evolved with close links to the east coast of Africa, emerging similar to coastal communities in Kenya and Tanzania, in particular Zanzibar. Comoran language is closest to Swahili and also shares its Arabic elements. Comorans even note the shared ancestry with Kenya, "sharing" credit for President Obama's African heritage with the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that members of his Kenyan grandmother could have come from the Comoros. The twentieth century French colonial and post-colonial period redirected Comoran economics and culture toward France -- 200,000 Comorans now live there -- at the expense of cutting the Comoros off from its region.

13. (U) Comoran traders and elites interested in establishing a sustainable economy for their country believe close ties with their neighbors to the west are essential. The Comoros is isolated in general, has strong ties to France that only benefit part of the population, and trades less and less with francophone Madagascar, where red tape and poor transportation links stifle trade. Comoran traders supply the domestic market with imported goods, paid with tens of millions of dollars in remittances from France. In recent years, the trend is to import more from Tanzania and Kenya.

Comoros Trade Office In Tanzania  
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14. (U) Fahmy Thabit of the Comoros Chamber of Commerce, told Comoros Officer an office would be established at "Exposition Park" in Dar es Salaam to facilitate and formalize bilateral trade. The establishment in 2008 of the Tanzanian Ex-Im Bank in the Comoros, including MoneyGram service, offers a more efficient payment system for trade. Working in partnership with the Tanzanian Board of External Trade, Thabit described an ambitious agenda to support traders, expedite customs clearance, and improve transport links. At present, the Comoros (COMESA) and Tanzania (SADC) do not have efficient mechanisms in place to simplify and reduce the cost of trade. According to Thabit, the GOT said they do not have data on the value of trade with Comoros which is dominated by informal shipments on five bulk cargo vessels moving between the two countries. One published estimate reported Comoros-bound Tanzanian exports (by weight) grew over 60 percent to 500,000 tons in 2008 over the previous year.

15. (U) Thabit elaborated that it is "natural" for the Comoros to

reestablish links with the Swahili coast based on centuries of history. The Comoran Chamber of Commerce plans investment, health, and cultural exchanges with Tanzania and Kenya. Finding France, Mayotte, and Reunion expensive or inaccessible, many Comorans travel to Tanzania for medical treatment. Said Mchangama, President of the Mayor's Association of Grande Comore, emphasized that links to Tanzania are essential for poor Comorans to relearn basic skills to generate grassroots economic subsistence. According to Thabit, the Comoros will benefit from the relatively sophisticated Tanzanians and Kenyans for training and support in artisan industries, fishing and agriculture. While trade is one-way now, the Comorans hope African investors may establish operations here to export to their markets. With Comoros nascent relationship with Gulf investors from Kuwait and Dubai, the Chamber hopes to take advantage of regional trade and tourism opportunities.

#### Strong Bilateral Ties

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¶6. (U) In late 2008, President Sambi addressed the Tanzanian Parliament to express his gratitude for Tanzania's leadership in the African Union military intervention in Anjouan to restore order and depose Colonel Bacar. A Tanzanian delegation in Moroni in late-2008 told the Ambassador they intended to open a diplomatic mission in Moroni, but did not offer a timeline. Growing numbers of young Comorans are studying in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, finding relatively affordable opportunities in higher education close to home. Both Comoran Union officials and private sector operators have told us of the start of talks with the Tanzanian counterparts to address the threat of illegal trafficking between their countries, reportedly in drugs, illicit timber and possibly arms.

#### COMMENT

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¶7. (U) Comoros history of political instability exacerbated its isolation in the east African region. The Embassy's top objective is political stability so that Comoros can become a responsible country in the region in terms of security and economic development. Renewed links to the Swahili Coast are positive and pragmatic signs for Comoros' near term prospects. END SUMMARY.

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